

New report reveals industry-led initiative restricting products advertised to kids fails to protect them

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Although recent revisions to the nutrition criteria used by the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), the food industry's self-regulatory program, led to minor nutritional improvements in products that may be advertised to kids, the initiative fails to

meaningfully protect them from marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, according to a new report from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health at the University of Connecticut.

The report, FACTS 2022. Food industry self-regulation: Changes in [nutrition](#) of foods and drinks that may be advertised to [children](#), examined recent revisions to nutrition criteria set by the CFBAI—an industry self-regulatory program in which 19 food and beverage companies have voluntarily pledged to limit unhealthy food advertising to children under age 12. The report found that while participating companies made some improvements to the nutritional quality of products advertised to children, there remain significant areas for improvement.

More than one-third of food products that companies indicate may be advertised to kids do not qualify as healthy, including sugary cereals, sweet snacks, and crackers. In addition, companies can advertise directly to children low-calorie drinks sweetened with sugar and/or non-nutritive sweeteners, even though child health experts recommend they should not be served to children.

The authors also noted loopholes that allow companies to market products to children that don't adhere to the CFBAI's nutritional criteria. The report finds that CFBAI-participating companies still offer other unhealthy brands and products with marketing that appeals to children under 12 years old, via packaging, websites, in-store displays, and sponsorships. Further, children ages 12-17 do not receive any protection from marketing under current guidelines. Additionally, CFBAI companies can still advertise brands directly to children, even when the majority of products offered by those brands do not meet CFBAI nutrition criteria.

"While the CFBAI's revised nutrition criteria are a step in the right

direction, they fall short of what's needed to regulate the industry and keep kids healthy," said Melissa Jensen, the study's lead author. "We know that unhealthy food and beverage marketing has a profound effect on kids' diets and health. CFBAI must address loopholes and apply stricter standards in order to make meaningful improvement."

Previous analyses of the CFBAI identified limitations in its effectiveness at protecting children from unhealthy food marketing and recommended improvements, including stricter nutrition standards. In 2018, CFBAI announced revised nutrition criteria that were then put in place in January 2020. In this report, the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health evaluated the nutrition quality of the products that were included on the list of products that may be advertised to children as of August 2020 by using an NPI score, an overall nutrition score based on the nutrient profiling model used to identify healthy products that can be advertised to children in the United Kingdom.

Key findings include:

- Overall nutrition quality of drinks improved slightly; more than three-quarters of the drinks did not contain added sugar or non-nutritive sweeteners. Companies added healthier drinks such as water and milk.
- The number of food products that may be advertised to children has declined, and the nutrition quality of sweet snacks and yogurts improved slightly.
- Thirty-seven percent of food products that may be advertised to children do not qualify as healthy, and companies listed no fruits or vegetables.
- Two-thirds of products offered by brands that may advertise directly to children are not included on the CFBAI list. One-half of these non-listed food products did not qualify as healthy.

Overall, stricter standards are required to substantially improve the nutritional quality of the foods and beverages marketed to children, including:

- CFBAI should revise its nutrition criteria. It 1) could model its criteria on nutrition profiling models established by independent experts, such those in the United Kingdom, Chile, and Mexico; and 2) should not allow drinks sweetened with added sugar and/or non-nutritive sweeteners.
- CFBAI should expand the types of marketing covered by [company](#) pledges to also require nutrition criteria for all products marketed directly to children, including on product packaging, in all child-oriented settings, sponsorships, and social media.
- CFBAI should expand its child audience definition to include children up to at least 14 years old, and ideally 17 years old, who are unprotected under its current guidelines.
- The U.S. [federal government](#) should eliminate unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children as a tax-deductible corporate expense.
- The U.S. Federal Trade Commission can establish voluntary guidelines for companies to ensure that the [products](#) they advertise to children promote a healthy diet.
- Policymakers at the state and local levels should restrict unhealthy food marketing in their communities, including in schools, fast [food](#) restaurants, and retail locations.

The [study](#) was co-authored by Fran Fleming-Milici, Ph.D. and Jennifer Harris, Ph.D., MBA.

Provided by UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

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